Transgressions and Transformations in the Twentieth Century Indian Women's Autobiography: A Comparative Study of Indian English and Regional Autobiographies

> "To be a woman and speak is already to submit to the phallocentric order while gloriously contradicting it, to serve as the very sign of transgression itself."
>
> (Brodzki, 157)

It is not an exaggeration to claim that women's act of speaking or writing itself is a transgression. Women's desire to come out of the closed curtains of their private lives is important because the personal can no longer remain personal, but becomes public or political. The self-portraits or the personal narratives enable women writers to speak about the silences in women's lives. The act of giving voice to the silences is nothing but transgression. By introducing transgressive methodology in writing, they not only change the existing practices, but also initiate the new tradition of women's writing. Thus women writers attempt transformation through transgressions.

The present research intends to consider the very practice of writing by women as a transgressive step. In addition, women's attempt to transform or change the stereotypical roles of an ideal Indian woman is emphasized. Indian woman is often recognized by her self-effacing, self-sacrificing and uncomplaining qualities, which are propagated and perpetuated by Indian mythologies and literature. She who is most passive and most selfless is considered the ideal woman. Indian women try to

renounce all their passions and desires, to fit themselves into the frame of ideal womanhood. They think that a woman cannot have a life apart from her husband and family. A woman is trained from her childhood to conform, adjust and to never think about her own self. A woman who writes her autobiography goes against this norm of disregarding oneself. Thus a woman autobiographer can be called a transgressor, as she crosses the limits to create a space for herself. The present research aspires to study this transgression of the woman writer, who does not wish to become an ideal Sita or Savitri. As Jasbir Jain says, “The act of writing has enabled them (women) to move outside the narrow role of man’s helpmeet, outside the role of the seductress, the angel or the witch” (9). In the context of understanding the expanded roles and images of women autobiographers, the dissertation addresses and analyses "Transgressions and Transformations in Twentieth Century Indian Women's Autobiography: A Comparative Study of Indian English and Regional Autobiographies."

The autobiographies selected for this study are as follows:

- *Gejjeya Hejje Nudi* (1971) by Chandrabhaga Devi
- *My Story* (1976) by Kamala Das
- *Time Pass: The Memoirs of Protima Bedi* (2000) by Protima Bedi
- *The Voice of the Heart: An Autobiography* (2004) by Mrinalini Sarabhai
- *Dancing in the Family: An Unconventional Memoir of Three Women* (2004) by Sukanya Rahman
- *A Woman of Substance: The Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza* (2005) by Begum Khurshid Mirza
- *Close-Up: Memoirs of a Life on Stage and Screen* (2010) by Zohra Segal

- *Hotthu Kanthuva Munna* (2010) by Sara Aboobacker
- *Solisabeda Gelisayya* (2010) by Prema Karanth
- *Anudinada Antharagange* (2012) by Pratibha Nandakumar
- *Nanu, Bhargavi* (2012) by Bhargavi Narayan
- *A Life in Words: Memoirs* (2012) by Ismat Chughtai
- *You Ask, I Tell: An Autobiography* (2013) by Hansa Wadkar
- *Kudi Esaru: Thit-hatti Thirugi Nodidaga* (2017) by Dr. Vijaya
- *One Foot on the Ground: A Life Told Through the Body* (2019) by Shanta Gokhale

Out of the primary sources listed above, the autobiographies originally published in English are: Protima Bedi's *Time Pass: The Memoirs of Protima Bedi*; Begum Khurshid Mirza's *A Woman of Substance: The Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza*; Sukanya Rahman's *Dancing in the Family: An Unconventional Memoir of Three Women*; Mrinalini Sarabhai's *The Voice of the Heart: An Autobiography*; Zohra Segal's *Close-Up: Memoirs of a Life on Stage and Screen*, and Shanta Gokhale's *One Foot on the Ground: A Life Told Through the Body*. Although Kamala Das's *My Story* was originally written in Malayalam with the title *Ende Katha*, the English version of this autobiography was not a direct translation, but rewritten in English by the autobiographer herself.

The selected autobiographies written in Kannada are: Chandrabhaga Devi's *Gejjeya Hejje Nudi*; Prema Karanth's *Solisabeda Gelisayya*; Sara Aboobacker's *Hotthu Kanthuva Munna*; Pratibha Nandakumar's *Anudinada Antharagange*; Bhargavi Narayan's *Nanu, Bhargavi*; and Dr. Vijaya's *Kudi Esaru*. The other two autobiographies taken up for study have been translated into English from other Indian

languages. They are Ismat Chughtai's *A Life in Words: Memoirs*, which was originally published in Urdu, titled *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* (1994), and later translated into English by M. Asaduddin; and Hansa Wadkar's *You Ask, I Tell: An Autobiography* – originally published in Marathi with the title *Sangtye Aika* (1970), and translated by Jasbir Jain and Shobha Shinde in 2013.

Pratibha Nandakumar, Prema Karanth, Chandrabhaga Devi and Bhargavi Narayan were brought up in the patriarchal Hindu families. Sara Aboobacker, Ismat Chughtai, and Begum Khurshid Mirza belong to orthodox Muslim families; yet they received education and strived for Muslim women's education. Zohra Segal was born in a Muslim community and married a Hindu. She was a dancer as well as an actress. Protima Bedi who ran into several controversies being a model, later turns into a very traditional *Odissi* dancer, representing Indian art and culture. All these women autobiographers are from different professional backgrounds. Kamala Das and Pratibha Nandakumar are women poets as well as writers. Being a socially responsive writer, Sara Aboobacker represents the problems of her own community. Prema Karanth, Bhargavi Narayan, Begum Khurshid Mirza, Hansa Wadkar, and Zohra Segal represent the lives of women stage actors, directors and artists. The autobiographies of Mrinalini Sarabhai, Chandrabhaga Devi, Protima Bedi and Sukanya Rahman give an insight into the experiences of women dancers. Sukanya Rahman writes the life-stories of three generation of dancers – Ragini Devi, her grandmother; Indrani, her mother, and herself.

The analysis of the women's autobiographies listed above has been done in five chapters: the first one provides an introduction to the thesis, and the next two chapters focus on the performing selves and the last two on the writing-bodies of renowned women writers. The second chapter focuses on women dancers'

autobiographical narratives. Although the women dancers feel independent, and empowered with their enabled dancing bodies, they endorsed some of the conventional roles, by playing the characters such as ‘Sita’ – the image of ideal womanhood – in their dance recitals. They have thus reinforced the cultural and gender codes as per the expectations of society. The third chapter addresses the life narratives of the actresses onstage/ theatre. In contrast to dancers, the theatre women do not hold on to the image of the docile body. The space of theatre had already integrated with several literary, social and cultural as well as theatre movements, and hence addressed the issues related to women without inhibitions.

The third and fourth chapters concentrate on selected autobiographies by already established women writers. The third chapter is an analysis of women writing the bodies, and their transgressions, in terms of representing the anxious body, menstruating body, reproducing body, nurturing body, and the victimized as well as empowered body, etc. The fourth chapter analyses the selected autobiographies of Muslim women writers such as Ismat Chughtai, Sara Aboobacker, and Begum Khurshid Mirza – an actress and writer. This chapter addresses the doubly marginalised hidden bodies of the Muslim women and their struggle to enter the public sphere. The transforming selves of these women provide a different narrative: they record their struggle for education, and for freedom from seclusion, besides their problems of inclusion and exclusion from the writers’ space with reference to women’s literature in general, as well as mainstream literature.

I. Introduction

The introductory chapter focuses on the growth and development of the study of autobiography as a genre of literature. The initial critical practices attempt to define autobiography. The later critics focus on providing certain boundaries to autobiography by concentrating on the generic divisions, especially by trying to mark out autobiography from other autobiographical forms such as memoirs, reminiscences, diaries, journals, and letters. The discussion on the elements of fact and fiction in autobiography was a favourite subject for many critics. Apart from these, the exclusion of women's self-writing from the critical literature on autobiography was questioned by feminist critics such as Estelle C. Jelinek and Domna C. Stanton. The difference between women's and men's writing is an additional subject that has been discussed often by such feminist critics. The postcolonial interpretation is another methodology used by the recent critics of autobiography, in addition to the feminist and deconstructionist perspectives. The inclusion of categories such as gender, race and caste in women's, Black and Dalit writing in the critical study of autobiography marks a clear departure from the earlier consideration of only the 'great'-white-male autobiographical writing.

Along with the review of literature, this chapter provides a survey of Indian women's autobiographies. It includes an analysis of the nineteenth century women's life narratives, with the purpose of understanding the gradual development of women autobiographers from traditional to the transformed. The first generation of women writers replicated the ideas of the reform narratives, by valorising the newly defined concept of 'perfect wife,' and 'companionate marriage.' The nineteenth century life narratives taken up for study are: *Amar Jiban* by Rashundari Devi, *Ranade: His Wife's Reminiscences* by Ramabai Ranade, *Saguna: The First Autobiographical Novel in*

English by an Indian Woman by Kripabai Satthianadhan, *My Story: The Autobiography of an Indian Widow* by Parvatibai Athavale, *Maze Purana* (My Saga) by Anandibai Karve, and *Atmacharitra ani Chaitra* (Mrs. Kashibai Kanitkar: Autobiography and Biography) by Kashibai Kanitkar. A brief analysis of these autobiographical narratives has been juxtaposed with the lives of rebellious women such as Rakhmabai, and Pandita Ramabai. This chapter provides a groundwork for the study of the twentieth century women's autobiographical narratives in the subsequent chapters.

II. Dance and Self-Identity: A Study of Women Dancers with Special Reference to the Life-writings of Mrinalini Sarabhai, Chandrabhaga Devi, Protima Bedi, and Sukanya Rahman

This chapter analyses the factors that lead towards the production of docile and at the same time powerful dancing bodies, by reading the autobiographies of women dancers, namely – Mrinalini Sarabhai, Chandrabhaga Devi, Protima Bedi and Sukanya Rahman. Mrinalini Sarabhai's *The Voice of the Heart: An Autobiography* (2004) reflects her passion for dance, and her struggles to introduce *Bharatanatyam* in the northern part of India. Chandrabhaga Devi's *Gejjeya Hejje Nudi* is a collection of her autobiographical letters over a brief period of time. Her letters to her parents and sons reveal her sense of responsibility as a mother, daughter, wife and most importantly a dancer. *Time Pass: The Memoirs of Protima Bedi* (2000) presents the life of a prominent model, Protima Bedi, who became a dancer and transformed her life from that of an extraordinary free woman to a serious artist who finally devoted her life to setting up *Nrityagram*, India's first modern *gurukul* for dance. Sukanya Rahman writes about the life of dancers in three generations, in her memoir – *Dancing in the*

Family: An Unconventional Memoir of Three Women (2004). She begins with Ragini Devi, her grandmother and then Indrani, her mother and later herself.

It is interesting to note how certain factors reinforce the stereotypical values and traditional ideologies among the dancers. The authoritarianism within the classroom, and the focus on the *Guru-Shishya parampara*, gender and seniority codes have produced a group of submissive dancers. They are trained to be docile through continuous and rigorous training which enables them to evince joy in their performance, although they may be experiencing bodily pain. They have to consider the notions of perfect dancing body, the male gaze, and the idea of perpetuating divinity through dance. An emphasis on the purity of art form has confined them to the boundaries marked by their *gurus* and contemporaries, and hence they could neither represent their personal interpretations on stage, nor experiment with the themes of their dance recitals.

However the present scenario has changed, as dancers of today speak about their bodies in social media. And the recent development in the dance field has shown a positive sign of incorporating personal and individual interpretations along with the traditionalist approach passed on from the previous generations. The leading dancers of present time write and post their struggles and experiences (in social network sites). Their responsibility of maintaining and strengthening their body by exercising and toning body parts in order to match societal notions of aesthetic appearance required of a dancer's body when on stage is also discussed therein. A number of women dancers in the present day have moved beyond the stereotypical representations of women's bodies, to incorporate a feminist outlook and bring out women's issues in their dance shows.

III. Women on Stage: A Study of Women Theatre Personalities with special reference to the Autobiographies of Hansa Wadkar, Zohra Segal, Prema Karanth, and Bhargavi Narayan

The chapter "Women on Stage" focuses on the autobiographical narratives of actresses, who created their own spaces and identities as public figures. By reading these narratives one can understand their ability of self-assertion and formation of identity through their trend-setting performances. Their narratives envisaged them as strong and independent women, who balanced their personal and professional domains successfully. The creativity and experimentation can be seen in every actress taken up for study. The personal interpretations of actresses were welcomed in the theatre space, as it was always open to the radical thoughts influenced by social, political, and cultural movements. The actresses have crossed the boundaries on several occasions and written about them without reluctance. The idea of becoming an actress itself was transgressive as respectable families considered theatre and films as bad influences on youth and society in general, in their era. Hansa Wadkar entered theatre as a child artist, and went beyond the usual norms her boundaries in terms of her marriage, extramarital relationship, and various challenging roles she played as an actress. Zohra Segal was the first Muslim woman to travel to Germany to learn dance. The orthodox society was shocked by her courtship and marriage with Kameshwar, a Hindu. Prema Karanth and Bhargavi Narayan were high caste Hindu women, who were denied theatre space. Bhargavi's brother hated her theatre-related activities, but her mother supported her to evolve as a well-known actress in Kannada theatre. Prema Karanth was influenced by her husband B V Karanth, an eminent theatre personality who worked for modern Indian theatre. Her versatility as an actress and director gave her the confidence to experiment and establish children's theatre in Kannada.

IV. Writing the Self and the Body: A Study of Women Writers' Autobiographies, with Special Reference to Kamala Das, Pratibha Nandakumar, Dr. Vijaya, and Shanta Gokhale

The practice of inscribing one's body in writing was not common in India until the publication of Kamala Das's *My Story*, a pioneering autobiographical work that breaks the linguistic constraints of dominant autobiographical narrative practices. Hélène Cixous calls for 'writing the body' and analyses how a woman writing woman and writing the body can represent the feminine and release herself from the linguistic constraints of masculine oppression, using Lacan's model of phallic-centred language (Laura Alexandra).

Kamala Das's *My Story* is known for its astounding self-revelation. Her honesty in narrating her transgressions has been admired as well as criticised by the readers. Pratibha Nandakumar's quest for true love and her openness in narrating her life suggests some similarity between her and Kamala Das. The chapter analyses two more autobiographies by renowned writers – Dr. Vijaya and Shanta Gokhale – who worked passionately as journalists and shared similar interests in literature, theatre and art. *Kudi Esaru* by Vijaya has won the Central Sahitya Akademi Award for a Kannada work in 2019. Shanta Gokhale's *One Foot on the Ground: A Life told through the Body* seems unique, as the body plays a central role in the narration of her life. She writes various roles played by her body, as well as her illness, recovery, and such other bodily experiences.

The women autobiographers analysed in this chapter write about their bodies playing different roles, depending upon different circumstances. The construction of such role-plays confirm the bodies as social and cultural markers. They played different roles such as: a girl-child with an anxious body; an adolescent girl with a

crush on her teacher; a bride with a body more or less identified as a commodity; a wife with a passive and voiceless victim body; a wife with a reproducing body; a mother with a nurturing body; a transgressor with an all-giving body; a woman writer with an ability to write her body; and a spiritual being seeking a unity with God; and also an independent woman who understands her body, space and work well. Throughout the journey of life, the autobiographers construct their own spaces, questioning regulation by patriarchal structures, and gender norms.

V. Behind the Veil: A Study of Muslim Women's Autobiographies with special reference to Begum Khurshid Mirza, Ismat Chughtai, and Sara Aboobacker

This chapter represents a different perspective of writing bodies that are doubly deprived and marginalized in the dominant social history. The construction of ideal Indian womanhood and the image of progressive and educated women during the nineteenth century reform movement consider the upper middle class Hindu women and neglect the contrasting stereotypical images of Muslim women as backward and invisible. The authentic voices of these secluded women represent the dilemma arising out of conflicting demands from reformed society and their responsibility of maintaining respectability in the public sphere. The transgressions and transformations of the autobiographers become visible in their efforts to understand, conform, or confront and change the practices of education, seclusion, and also re-form family and personal spaces.

The autobiographies taken up for analysis in this chapter are: *A Woman of Substance: The Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza* by Begum Khurshid Mirza, an

actress and writer who expresses her life as a member of the Abdullah family, the founders of the Aligarh Girls' School; *Life in Words: Memoirs* by Ismat Chughtai, a well-known radical writer and educationist, who faced several controversies for her story "Lihaaf" (The Quilt); and *Hottu Kantuva Munna* by Sara Aboobacker, a regional Muslim woman writer, who has represented her struggles and interpretations about Muslim women's education and development.

. The analysis of the lives of these three autobiographers appears significant, because the later generations of Muslim women have followed the footsteps of these women. Apart from influencing other people, their ideas and attitudes have brought about noticeable changes in their own homes or inner circles/ spaces, and later got extended to other families in their community. Very slowly the entire community has opened up to new changes, with certain reservations towards the traditionalist beliefs.

VI. Conclusion

The concluding remarks highlight the significance of this study focussing on the transgressions and thereby the transformations initiated by the women autobiographers. They have questioned the stereotypical values that confined women to the roles of ideal wife/ mother/ daughter/ daughter-in-law. Their ability to write expressively about the experiences and transgressions in their lives suggests the emphasis they laid on self-assertion and self-importance. The women danseuses have established their self-identities in spite of their adherence to the strict, patriarchal patterns and values within the dancers' space. The women theatre personalities have emerged as empowered women with the voices of their own to question stereotypical values and roles allotted to them. The women writers have revealed their

transgressions through inscribing their bodies, and created a new trend in the women's autobiographical narratives. The efforts of Muslim women to cross the patriarchal and cultural boundaries have assured them an evolving space in the public domain.

The study of the selected women's autobiographies reveals that exposure to western influence, modern education and feminist readings have not been solely responsible for women's transgressions. The study confirms that local traditions and customs have not restricted them to stereotypical roles. One can also observe the existence of double marginalisation while dealing with the transgressions of these women autobiographers. A few future possibilities for research are suggested in the conclusion.

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